

Sermon: 30<sup>th</sup> Jan 2022: 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

One of the things you may not know about me is that I am a huge lover of animals. All things small and fluffy, large and four legged and everything in between, I just want to cuddle them all and make friends with every one I come across. When I was growing up and working out what I wanted to do with my life it made sense then for me to try some work experience as a vet.

But, as I sat observing my first operation and the insides of a cat suddenly became the outsides, and the world started to get a little fuzzy and the lights started to go out, and the room suddenly got very hot and my breakfast didn't seem quite as pleasant as it had in the morning, as I left the room and staggered back to the staff room like a drunken sailor on a stormy sea, I came to the conclusion that this probably wasn't the vocation for me.

Luckily for me then the role of the priest has changed a lot since Jesus' time, because today we remember the presentation of Jesus in the temple. Luke in our reading today actually combines two ceremonies here, the ritual cleansing of Mary 40 days after childbirth, and the presentation and dedication of the firstborn son to God.

To do this, animals would be offered as sacrifices, in this case 2 doves or pigeons, and the priest at the temple would sacrifice them on the altar. Imagine my relief that when I am ordained, the only sacrifices I need to make are that of prayer and thanksgiving.

Now you may already know that the offering of doves or pigeons was the sign, not necessarily of poverty because Joseph would have earned a living through carpentry, but certainly of modest means. Those *with* money would have offered a lamb.

Through this whole event Luke is telling us that Mary and Joseph were devout and obedient Jews, obeying the law of Moses found in Leviticus and elsewhere in the OT, and that they were not well off or high in social standing, continuing the story of Jesus' identification with and love of the poor.

You may also be quite familiar with the story of Simeon too. A devout and deeply faithful man to whom God promised that he would see the Messiah before he died. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Simeon makes his way to the temple only to find Mary, Joseph and little baby Jesus and, immediately

recognising the importance of this little baby, praises God for fulfilling his promise to him and allowing him to see the miracle of Jesus, saviour of the whole world.

His words and prophecy over Jesus amaze Mary and Joseph, and have become famous and well used in Christianity, becoming known as the Nunc Dimittus sung at evensong or said in evening prayer. They declare the role that Jesus was to have not only for Israel, but the whole world.

They anticipate the suffering that is to come, and end with the warning to Mary that 'a sword will pierce your own soul too', often understood as a warning for the pain Mary will experience as she loses her son, or perhaps in Luke's gospel, for the pain she will experience in the division that surrounds her son.

What you may be more unfamiliar with though is what I want to focus on today, and that is the other person present that day, the prophetess Anna. Now in your pews there is a copy of some different depictions of the presentation of Jesus, I encourage you to have a look at it and to pass it around to those close to you when you finish. If you don't have sight of one now don't worry, but try to have a look before you leave.

**On the left There** is a beautiful image of Simeon crying out in joy clutching little Jesus, and there is loads of wonderful symbolism hidden within the image. However, what you might notice in the other images is what I found when I tried to find images of Anna. She is there, but she is often depicted in the background, peering over, secondary.

Indeed, as I tried to read in preparation for today, the commentaries that I consulted had pages upon pages of things to say about Simeon, and yet only 2 or 3 sentences to say about Anna. One commentator said that Luke presents Anna because it is 'perhaps in keeping with his desire to present 2 witnesses'. Is this the only reason?

Now yes, Luke is keen to present an 'orderly' account as he says in his own words at the beginning of his gospel, with careful investigation and reporting of his findings and yes, 2 witnesses would certainly be more credible than 1. But the inclusion of Anna is so much more important than that. Yet, as is often the case for the women, her words are not recorded and she is pushed to the side-lines.

But Anna is significant for several reasons. Firstly, Luke tells us that Anna is a widow who, since her husband's death has been faithfully waiting, fasting and praying in the temple area, day and night, for years and years. Depending on how you read Luke, she is either 84 or even 105 years old, still there, day and night.

Whilst the spirit prompted Simeon to come to the temple, God didn't need to prompt Anna, she was already there, always there. By the standards of their society Anna would have been bottom of the rung, elderly, widowed and unmarried, she would have been of little social importance, yet God saw her, God valued and rejoiced at her devotion, and God made sure that she too got to witness Jesus in the flesh. God spoke to Anna and the words we do not hear are words that God gave and trusted to her alone.

Secondly, I want you to notice what Anna does with the experience and information given to her. When we think of Simeon, you might, as I once did and as the picture portrays, imagine him as an old man. He *is* mentioned alongside the elderly Anna, and because he responds to this experience with Lord, 'you may now dismiss your servant in peace' we imagine that he is towards the end of his life.

But the Bible never actually tells us that Simeon is old, we don't know how old he was. But for Simeon, seeing the Messiah in the flesh is the absolute pinnacle of his life. That sensation of being so fulfilled in life that 'if I died now, I will die content, there is nothing else I have left to do or experience.' Whatever his age, Simeon is content and his life is complete.

But Anna does not respond like this. For her, even at 84 or 105, this is only the beginning. We're told that Anna began to speak to everyone about the child, telling everyone about him, informing all who came looking for redemption. Anticipation for the coming Messiah would have been high in this time, and perhaps there were even stirrings of rumours and news about a new-born baby in Bethlehem starting to travel.

Anna was so full of joy that she couldn't contain it. Telling everyone looking for such news that 'yes, he is here, she had seen him with her own eyes', passing on the good news. Anna was an evangelist, faithful and full of life until the end.

So there are 3 things that I would really like you to take away from today's look at Anna. Firstly, a call for the church to pay attention to the silenced voices in the world.

Though I certainly do want to celebrate and commend all the faithful men of God who follow in Simeon's footsteps today, I do particularly want to say to the women today that God hears and sees you. The worldwide church is sadly still not a place that values women as it does men, but God sees you as he saw Anna, he values faithful hearts and sees those things you do that may go unappreciated.

He can and will use you, no matter your age, to do his will and he will speak to you if you only listen and keep watch for him. Mary mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Elizabeth, Anna, the unnamed female prophets, God saw their faith, and God spoke to them.

Secondly, I want to encourage you to read your Bible. Anna is one of my favourite people in the Bible, I have resonated strongly with her since I first came across her in our wedding preparation, and only more so as I continue with my ordination training.

Maybe you resonate with someone biblically, maybe you're not sure, but perhaps look for those lesser-known voices, perhaps read one of the letters of the Bible from someone you have never heard of, or even read a well-known story and see if there is anyone in the side-lines, they often have important things to tell us if we but notice them.

Finally, I think Anna offers a challenge to us all. We have all now experienced the joy of the knowledge of Jesus coming to earth, and the hope and promise he gives us in life and in death. What do we choose to do with that knowledge? This is by no means a criticism of Simeon, but are we content with knowing this for ourselves and experiencing the comfort that this brings us personally?

Or are we like Anna, so over-flowing with the good news that we want to share it with all who are searching for hope, for answers, and for redemption? Anna is not a side character in this story, or only there as a second witness, but God chose her because he knew she would go and tell others the good news, will we do the same?

Amen.